

grow grow grow

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There is a sense of stability and survival if the household's food supply can be counted on under emergency conditions. Not so if the pantry has mostly empty shelves and the freezer is in about the same shape. From time to time, we hear the harbingers of doom state what can happen if produce or other food is contaminated by terrorists. We have no way of knowing what the international criminals are plotting, but now is not the time to drag our feet and become complacent. Instead, it is the time to begin preparing as much as possible to ensure that the food we preserve is as nutritious and free of contaminants as we can make it and that we put away plenty of it.

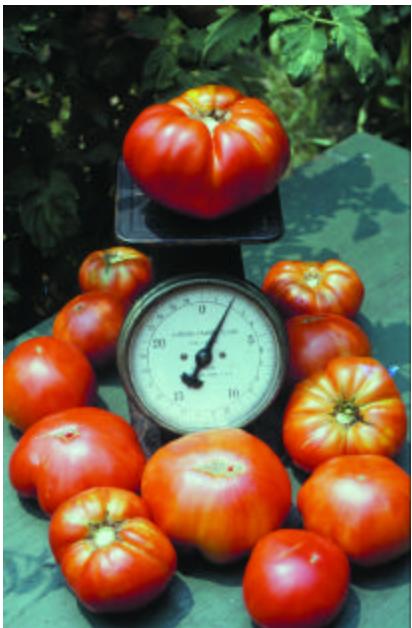
Those of us who are involved in gardening aren't too worried about the quality of produce coming from our gardens. We tend the plants from the time the seedlings appear until they mature and produce their crops. "Fresh from the garden," we take pride in saying and the excess we've put away canned, frozen, or dehydrated is a boost to our sense of well-being.

All emergencies don't necessarily result from catastrophes such as terrorist attacks. They can be produced by weather conditions—hurricanes, blizzards, tornadoes, and so on. We had one of those emergency situa-

Top: English peas are one of our spring delicacies and may be canned or frozen. The sooner they are cooked after picking, the better the flavor.

Middle: Home grown potatoes are a welcome addition to many meals. Those from our gardens have better flavor than those trucked hundreds of miles.

Bottom: Don't overlook what Nature produces in the wild. The native pecan is a favorite and grows mainly along river valleys in the central part of the United States.



Even though tomatoes may not be in perfect shape, when they are turned into soup, who knows?

tions in our southwest Arkansas area in 2000. It began on December 25 in the form of an ice storm, the likes of which had never before been recorded for this area. By nightfall, residents and businesses alike had lost electrical power. Folks with all-electric homes were really in a bad situation.

Fortunately, we have never put all of our eggs in one basket. We have a natural gas kitchen range and water heater and we have a real wood burning fireplace in our den. Nevertheless, due to the failure of our central heat system, our house could not be kept comfortably warm and it was downright cold in some rooms. Our electricity was off for 10 days and some folks had no power for 2 weeks or more. Our kerosene burning antique lamps from the good old days were pressed into service and we were thankful for a radio that could operate on batteries.

Trees that had endured all kinds of weather over the years were battered by the ice storm. Christmas night was like living with the sounds of a war

zone. Huge limbs and tops of trees snapped with gunshot sounds and came down with enormous force burying whatever grew beneath and near them. Tree farms were almost totaled. Orchards suffered likewise. Our garden area was ringed with the remains of what had once been shade trees. If the garden had not been in an open area, it would have taken weeks to clear it of debris. As it was, we only had to remove a few limbs and prune broken branches from some fruit trees. What a mess!

Our home canned and dehydrated items came through all right in the pantry, but the contents of our freezer thawed out and had to be discarded. Ordinarily, we could have taken all of this in stride, but I was on a walker due to a strained leg muscle forcing



Surplus crops of beans, peppers, and tomatoes may be made into delicious vegetable soup.



The okra plant not only produces edible pods, but it produces lovely yellow flowers to brighten the garden.

James to fall heir to all outside chores including bringing in wood for the fireplace. After things began to return to normal, James had a bout with pneumonia. The 2000-2001 holiday season was not one of our best. To add to the area's troubles, New Year's Day was ushered in with several inches of snow. This doesn't sound like much to northerners, but the camellia and magnolia adorned South is never ready for snow and ice.

I mention this trying experience to emphasize that disasters come in many forms and that we all need to be prepared when they happen. Most of all, we need to learn from them. One lesson we learned from the ice storm involved buying a generator, one that will produce enough power to keep essential appliances operating. We may never need the generator, but, if we do, at least we won't lose a freezer full of nourishing home-grown food plus the items in our refrigerator.

Praise be that winter doesn't last forever and spring always follows. Spring may not be perfect, but it's better than trying to deal with wintry



Small ornamental pumpkins heighten autumn table decorations, but the larger pumpkins can be made into several pints of canned pumpkin for pies, cakes, etc. conditions. The first sprigs of new grass and even chickweed are welcome as they tell us it's time to get out our hoes, rakes, and trowels and go about the business of freshening our food supply.

A few years ago, we converted our row type garden to raised beds and we have found that we now have a tendency to coordinate plants better, thus making the most of the space under cultivation. It's easier to control watering when necessary and compost stays where we put it. Unless one is trying to harvest enough produce to sustain a large number of people, raised beds are the way to go. A surprising amount of vegetables may be gathered from raised beds and it's easy to take out depleted early plants such as lettuce or spinach and replace them with summer crops. In turn, summer crops may be replaced with a variety of greens and plants that thrive under cool fall weather.

Folks who take heed for the future always begin gardening early, and

one of the first things planted in our Zone 8 is Irish potatoes. Oldtimers swear by the planting date of February 14, but it's hard to plant right on the 14th if the weather isn't cooperating. At any rate, by the time you dig your crop of potatoes, you should be able to use the space for a summer grower such as bush beans.

Potatoes come in quite a variety of choices now, some large like Red Pontiac or Kennebec and others of the mini or gourmet type. If you aren't familiar with growing potatoes, it might be well to check with your local County Extension Agent or a neighbor gardener to determine which varieties do best in your area and when to plant them. Like other plants, potatoes are subject to certain viruses, etc., and it's best to find out about diseases beforehand.

Whether you buy your potato pieces locally or from a seed company, you should get certified seed potatoes. If you buy whole potatoes, cut them into pieces containing not over three

Suggestions

1. Obtain a field guide, particularly one that gives information about wild plants growing in your area and how to forage for them. Many food plants are found on railroad dumps, in fields, and other cleared places. Some require a little more shade such as along the edge of wooded areas.

2. Buy a book on canning, freezing, and dehydrating food items. Buy one that is published by a manufacturer of canning supplies. Addresses may be found on cartons of canning supplies.

3. Unless you live in a dry climate such as New Mexico or Arizona where outside drying of fruits and vegetables is feasible, you will find an electric dehydrator very handy. It maintains a constant temperature, thus eliminating worry over humidity.

4. Anticipate what can happen to your food supply, particularly if in a freezer, when electrical power fails. Be ready with a backup system—a generator able to generate enough power to keep your essential appliances in operation.

5. Thieves seem to be on the increase. Don't place your freezer on your back porch in plain view or inside an unlocked area. Put it in your kitchen, utility room or somewhere not easily seen by prying eyes. Your freezer may be worth its weight in gold in case of a food emergency.

eyes. Do this a day or so before planting so that the cut surfaces will dry somewhat and be more disease resistant. To further immune them, dust the pieces with sulphur. Don't plant potatoes you have bought at the supermarket. They are not seed potatoes and your yield will be disappointing.

In our raised beds, we plant the potato eyes firmly about a foot apart on top of loose, loamy soil and cover them with about 4-5 inches of organic

mulch. As the sprouts push through the mulch, more is added to keep tubers from being exposed to the sun and developing green spots. This method produces a nice clean potato and the potatoes are easy to dig.

If you're planting in the regular way, you'll need to dig trenches about 6 inches wide and 8 inches deep in loose soil making trenches about 30 inches apart. Commercial fertilizer recommended is 5-10-10 which should be spread in the bottom of the trenches at a rate of about a pound to 25 feet. You never want potato pieces to come in direct contact with the fertilizer, so place at least 2 inches of soil over the fertilizer. Plant the potato pieces, eyes up, 12-15 inches apart and cover with about 4 inches of soil. After the first leaves emerge, start hilling up soil against the plants. As they grow, hill them with compost. Be sure that plants receive adequate water if dry spells occur.

Potatoes should be dug as soon as vines die down and the new potatoes spread out in a shady ventilated place. Any clinging dirt may be whisked off with a soft brush when dry. Potatoes will keep for several weeks stored in a cool place and even longer if refrigerated. If you haven't tasted cooked, freshly dug potatoes, you're in for a pleasant surprise. Treat your family to a good pot of potato soup. It'll go a long way toward satisfying hearty appetites. (See recipe.)

English peas grow well in early spring weather and the peas are excellent for freezing or canning. These peas may be planted when ground temperature is 45°-50°F., but if warm weather arrives early, yield will not be as heavy as vines tend to succumb to heat. You will see more English peas in northern gardens than in the South. We have had good luck with Dwarf Grey Sugar due to its heat tolerance. If we have a late spring, the pole type, Tall Telephone or Alderman, will produce well here.

Both have good flavor and the Dwarf Grey is also an edible pod pea.

Peas prefer moderately rich, loose soil with pH 6.0-8.0. Plant them according to packet directions, as some varieties require a little more room than others. The vines need support—sturdy wire trellises, brush cuttings, etc. Most varieties don't grow over 3 feet high, but the Tall Telephone grows to a height of 5 feet or more thus needing a taller support.

Peas are like ears of corn in that the sooner you can cook them the better, as they start to lose flavor and quality as soon as picked. It takes a backyard garden to do justice to the English pea. Can or freeze your excess peas as soon as possible after harvesting.

Many greens including mustard, spinach, turnip greens, and Pak Choi may be canned or frozen. All of these are easy to grow and yield best when planted in early spring. They all require the same type soil and growing conditions and are certainly worth considering if you like greens. Some gardeners prefer broadcasting the seeds and others like to plant in rows. We prefer rows, as it's easier to apply an organic mulch to keep dirt from splashing onto leaves during spring rains. No one likes to deal with gritty greens.

There are numerous other early yielding crops that may be enjoyed from the garden—radishes, carrots, beets, onions, cabbage, and so on. Avail yourself of some catalogs from established seed companies, compare prices and order seeds or plants to suit your taste and space. Blessings on those companies that send their catalogs to be perused during long winter months.

Summer probably gives us more produce from the garden to preserve than any other season. That's when it seems we have an overflow of everything—corn, beans, peppers, tomatoes, squash, you name it. Summer also gives us long days with plenty of sunshine. The plants need the long,

warm days to mature their crops and we need the long days to harvest and put away our excess.

Sometimes we tire of putting up each kind of vegetable individually. That's when imagination can give us some dandy ideas. For instance, how about merging tomatoes, green beans, carrots, and such into vegetable soup to tuck away in the freezer. (See recipe.) Frozen cartons of vegetable soup are very handy to have whether or not there's an emergency situation. Just put a carton in a double boiler to heat and serve with crackers or hot cornbread.

Besides your own garden, there are other places to find food plants to process. If you like strawberry preserves and you don't have space for strawberry plants in your garden, try seeking out wild strawberries. You'll find them growing in patches in fields mainly in the cooler parts of states east of the Mississippi River. We tried for several years to grow plants we had brought from Ohio and, although the plants thrived and multiplied, they were never very productive. We concluded our climate was a little too warm and humid for wild strawberries.

There are other berries, too—dewberries, blackberries, raspberries, and so on to harvest from the wild. Or, if you have space, you may want to purchase tame varieties from nurseries to plant along the edges of your garden. Wild berries have better flavor than the tame ones, but they may all be made into jellies and jams or the juice extracted, frozen, and used at a later date. Berries may be canned or frozen whole for cobblers, pies, cakes, etc.

Depending on the region in which you live, don't overlook the possibilities presented by wild plums, muscadines, persimmons, mulberries, May haws, crab apples—an endless list. There are also nut trees—hickory, pecan, beech, chinquapin, black walnut—another long list.

Growing in the wild are many vegetables—poke salad, dandelion, asparagus, wild onions, Jerusalem artichokes, mustard, wild rice, and on and on. Many of these are best enjoyed fresh, but a number may be preserved. They are a tasty source of food, full of nutrition and will certainly provide variety to meals.

Foods from the wild may be harvested yearlong beginning with early greens to nuts maturing in the fall. It's a pity that we lean heavily on what we can raise in our gardens and turn down what Nature offers us just for the taking. Pioneering people were proficient in foraging for what the land had to offer even though many of them did have gardens. We newcomers need to learn more about nature's bounty and how to use it.

During this day and uncertain time, it is foolish not to be prepared for emergencies. Even primitive people put away food to sustain them during tough winters and other trying times. We have come a long way from their methods, but we still have one thing in common with them—we still depend on food to keep us going.

We live in a land of plenty. Let's make the most of it and in so doing be prepared for the unexpected.

Some reliable seed companies:

Pinetree Garden Seeds

Box 300
New Gloucester, ME 04260

W. Atlee Burpee & Co.

Warminster, PA 18974

J. W. Jung Seed Co.

335 S. High Street
Randolph, WI 53957-0001

Totally Tomatoes

P.O. Box 1626
Augusta, GA 30903

Geo. W. Park Seed Co.

1 Parkton Avenue
Greenwood, SC 29647-0001

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Potato soup

4 cups peeled, diced Irish (white) potatoes
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
3 tablespoons flour
1 tablespoon butter or oleo
1 quart whole milk
1 egg, beaten
salt and pepper to taste

Boil potatoes and onion in just enough water to cover. When tender, add milk, salt, and pepper and reheat.

In small skillet, brown flour in butter and slowly blend into potato mixture. Add a bit of water to beaten egg and slowly stir into soup. Let simmer a few minutes to thicken. Stir often to keep from sticking. (I like to transfer this soup to a double boiler when it begins to simmer, as there's less danger of sticking.)

Garnish bowls of soup with chopped green onions, parsley, or grated carrots to add a touch of color.

This is a versatile basic recipe. Any number of things may be added to change it. Try adding tuna that has been drained and flaked. Another idea is to add crumbled cooked bacon.

Succotash

Going 'way back—back to the time when Native Americans befriended the first white settlers, there was a dish called succotash. This was one of the foods served by Indians to the settlers. (No microwave ovens or kitchen ranges in those days.)

Succotash is never as tasty or nutritious as when made from fresh corn and beans. Canned ingredients never do it justice. This is the basic recipe. Some versions add chopped onion, bits of crumbled, cooked bacon and so on.

3-5 large ears fresh corn (2 cups when cut from cob)
2 cups fresh butter beans (limas)
5 tablespoons butter
salt and pepper to taste

Boil corn in water about 7-10 minutes until corn is just tender. Remove ears from water and cut off kernels as close to cobs as possible. (The cobs lend flavor, so you may want to boil them with the corn and beans and discard cobs before serving.)

Cook beans in just enough water to cover. (Should require about 20 minutes.) Combine corn and beans, butter, and seasoning and reheat. Serve hot.

This dish is not recommended for preserving as it loses flavor in the process. It's mainly to enjoy when there's a surplus of corn or lima beans from the garden.

Vegetable soup

This is a basic recipe. Many substitutions may be made, such as adding lima beans, corn, squash, rice, etc., and leaving out sweet peppers or okra. Dried basil and garlic powder may be used instead of the fresh items. Be sure all vegetables are cleaned and any blemishes removed.

1 quart green beans, snipped
1 quart tomatoes, peeled and chopped
2 cups sweet peppers, coarsely chopped
2 cups onions, chopped
2 cups carrots, chopped
2 cups okra, sliced in ¼-inch rounds
1 cup sweet basil, chopped
1 large clove garlic, minced
1 Jalapeno pepper, finely chopped
1 quart beef or chicken stock
1 quart chopped, cooked beef or chicken meat
6 ounces broken spaghetti, elbow macaroni, or your favorite type pasta
salt to taste

Put all vegetables and meat in a large pot and cover them with water. Add meat stock, cover pot, and bring to a boil. Add pasta and reduce heat to simmer. Cook until vegetables are tender—about 20-30 minutes. Stir

occasionally. If soup seems too thick due to absorption of water by pasta, add a bit more water until you have your desired consistency.

You may prefer to season this soup with butter. I like to season with beef or chicken stock. I do not buy the highest priced beef or chicken. Instead I buy meaty beef soup bones or neck bones, pressure cook them (may be boiled, but takes longer), and remove the meat to use in soup. (Some four-footed friends are happy to get the bones.) Any surplus beef stock is put in airtight cartons and frozen for later use.

Chicken leg quarters pressured or boiled will yield good chicken stock. Surplus stock may also be frozen. (I don't give the chicken bones to the dogs.)

Have a hearty meal from your soup and put the rest in the freezer. Be sure to leave room at the tops of cartons for expansion. Don't forget to date and label cartons which should keep well for at least a year. Δ